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S E C R E T ASUNCION 000516

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STATE FOR WHA/BSC KBEAMER, INR ASTEIN, CA/VO/L/C JBRUNSON  
AND IMAKLE-WILLIAMS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/27/2028

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CVIS](#) [PA](#)

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER NOMINATION IGNITES CONTROVERSY

REF: A. 06 STATE 149525

[1](#)B. ASUNCION 512

Classified By: Ambassador James C. Cason for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) This message contains an action request in paragraph  
[1](#)5.

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)2. (S) President-elect Fernando Lugo's decision to designate Paraguayan Ambassador to Lebanon Alejandro Hamed Franco as his foreign minister July 23 ignited a domestic political controversy. In 2007, the Public Ministry brought criminal charges against Hamed, and the MFA opened a separate investigation against him, for his decision to issue 117 visas to Lebanese nationals without prior written authorization from the Foreign Ministry. Just before Lugo named Hamed foreign minister, a judge threw out the criminal case against him. Hamed's previous U.S. visa was revoked in September 2006 (ref A). Hamed replaced Lugo's first foreign minister-designate, Milda Rivarola, who resigned July 10. Hamed's nomination illicit strong objections from the Paraguayan Congress. Post is concerned that Hamed illegally assisted Lebanese foreign nationals, incidentally or otherwise, who could have ties to criminal organizations or Hizballah. END SUMMARY.

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HAMED INVESTIGATED FOR VISA ISSUANCES  
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[1](#)3. (C) President-elect Fernando Lugo's decision to designate Paraguayan Ambassador to Lebanon Alejandro Hamed Franco as his foreign minister July 23 ignited a domestic political controversy. The Public Ministry brought criminal charges against Hamed, and the MFA opened a separate investigation against him in 2007, for his decision to issue 117 visas to Lebanese nationals without prior authorization from the Foreign Ministry between May and December 2006 -- allegedly coinciding with the July-August 2006 Israeli-Lebanese conflict. (NOTE: A Paraguayan presidential decree mandates that the foreign minister must authorize, in writing, all visas issued to foreign nationals from Arab states, including Lebanon, prior to issuance. END NOTE.) Hamed said he issued the visas with verbal authorization for humanitarian reasons in order to assist Lebanese foreign nationals impacted by the

Israeli-Lebanese conflict. (NOTE: Press reports quote then-Foreign Minister Leila Rachid as denying that she gave Hamed verbal authorization. END NOTE). The MFA's internal investigation showed that Hamed, in violation of the presidential decree, issued visas with irregularities before, during and after the conflict. The MFA's Legal Affairs Director Carlos Fleitas said almost 70 percent of the 117 visas issued were expedited before and after the Israel-Lebanese conflict, and that only 17 were issued during it.

¶4. (C) Just before Lugo named Hamed foreign minister, a judge threw out the criminal case against him. Judge Patricia Gonzalez dismissed Hamed's case July 23, arguing that he expedited the visas under "exceptional circumstances," and Judge Teresita Monjagata recommended July 25 to Foreign Minister Ruben Ramirez that Hamed be absolved of wrongdoing. Although Ramirez must still decide whether he will take disciplinary action against Hamed, it appears likely that Ramirez will absolve him. (NOTE: If disciplined, Hamed could be fired and barred from public office for two to five years. END NOTE.) Lugo's chief of staff-designate, Miguel Lopez Perito, told the press that there were no further legal impediments to Hamed's nomination as Foreign Minister.

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HAMED'S U.S. VISA REVOKED  
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¶5. (S) The Department prudentially revoked Hamed's B1/B2 U.S. visa in September 2006, citing INA 212(a)(3)(B) (ref A). The case is available for review at VOIS ID 628612. A CLASS namecheck on Hamed shows two classified "00" hits. The first is from August 2006, with TSC ID 1156642 and TIDE file number ¶237749. The second hit, dated October 2007, postdates the revocation of his visa with TSC ID number 1156643 and references TIDE file number 237752. Post understands these hits relate to Hamed's ties with Hizballah in the Tri-Border Area and Lebanon. Because of Hamed's potential ineligibility under INA 212(a)(3)(B), Post would submit a SAO if he applies for a new visa. He will likely attend the upcoming UN General Assembly. In view of the short time interval between the inauguration August 15 and UNGA, Post appreciates Department guidance on actions linked to Hamed's visa case that should be taken in advance of his visa application.

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ABOUT HAMED  
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¶6. (S) Hamed, whose father immigrated to Paraguay from Syria, has pro-Palestinian sympathies. He lived in Uruguay and Argentina as a child, and speaks Spanish, English, French and Arabic. He holds a doctorate in history from the National University of Asuncion (UNA) and a degree in history from the University of Uruguay in Montevideo. Prior to being named Paraguayan ambassador to Lebanon by President Nicanor Duarte Frutos in November 2004, Hamed served as a history professor at both UNA and Catholic University of Asuncion, as well as head of the International Relations Department at the National University of Ciudad del Este. (NOTE: Ciudad del Este is the epicenter of Paraguay's Lebanese community. Over 40,000 individuals of Lebanese descent reside in Paraguay, primarily in or around this city. END NOTE.) Hamed's designation as ambassador (as a political appointee) to Lebanon was the product of his close relationship with then-Foreign Minister Leila Rachid, who is of Syrian and Lebanese descent. Hamed is the author of four books, including "A Different Islam" and "The Palestine Intifada and its Poetry" -- in which he strongly criticizes Israel and calls Israelis "racists" -- and defends the Palestinian's armed struggle. In his books, he also criticized Israel and European countries for "taking over Arab lands." Movement Toward Socialism (P-MAS) leader and National Emergency Secretariat minister-designate Camilo Soares, Hamed's former philosophy student, reportedly proposed Hamed's nomination to Lugo.

¶7. (S) Hamed replaced Lugo's former foreign minister-designate, Milda Rivarola, who resigned July 10. Rivarola, a leftist-leaning political analyst and historian, reportedly resigned in protest of Lugo's announcement that Liberal Carlos Mateo Balmelli would run Paraguay's Itaipu Dam operations. However, Rivarola told DCM and Pol/Econ Chief that she was disappointed that Lugo was following the Paraguayan tradition of political quotas to name his cabinet, as she had hoped he would break from that pattern.

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AFTERMATH OF HAMED'S NOMINATION  
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¶8. (C) Hamed's nomination illicit strong objections from the Paraguayan Congress. Many members of Congress objected to Hamed's nomination because they consider him a polarizing figure whose pro-Palestinian biases could negatively impact Paraguay's foreign relations. Beloved Fatherland Party Deputy Carlos Soler expressed concern July 23 that the Foreign Minister-designate is too controversial and has too many detractors to manage Paraguay's foreign policy. Several Senate Foreign Relations committee members, as well as members of the Paraguayan Jewish community, also expressed public concern over the appointment, and will question Hamed August 6 regarding his foreign policy plans. After Hamed admitted knowing very little about Mercosur or the FARC, Senate Foreign Relations committee president Alberto Grillon criticized his nomination, given that Mercosur is Paraguay's top foreign policy priority. An ABC Color editorial argued July 24 that "to name a pro-Palestine and pro-Islamic as head of Paraguayan diplomacy" would be a setback for the country, involving Paraguay in conflicts that have nothing to do with Paraguay.

¶9. (S) Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief expressed concern about Hamed's possible nomination with several Lugo advisors in the days leading up to the official announcement, pursuant to President-elect Lugo's request that the Embassy share information with him about his potential Cabinet members. While initially appearing receptive to the Embassy's private concerns, Lugo advisors then asked Embassy officials for documents demonstrating Hamed's incapacity to serve as foreign minister. Embassy officials did not offer any such documents; Lugo moved forward with the nomination. Despite press reports about U.S. objections and "interference," the Embassy publicly commented that this was an internal Paraguayan matter, and one that President-elect Lugo would decide. The Embassy emphasized the United States' long-standing close relations with Paraguay and stated that the Embassy looks forward to continuing such relations with the Lugo administration.

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EARLY POLICY INDICATIONS  
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¶10. (SBU) Hamed has stated that his relations with the United States will be "excellent," assuring the public in a July 24 press conference that there "won't be a radical variation in our foreign policy of friendship and cooperation that we've traditionally maintained with the United States." When asked whether the United States might deny him a visa, he said he would be guaranteed passage to the United Nations, and that he wasn't sure why he wouldn't "be welcome" in the United States. In a separate July 27 press interview, Hamed said Paraguay must "maintain at all costs" good relations with the United States. Hamed also called the war in Iraq "a tragedy, an error," but spoke favorably about Barack Obama's plans to retire U.S. troops from Iraq in 2010.

¶11. (SBU) In the days since his appointment, Hamed has spoken in favor of Venezuela joining Mercosur, saying "the more (in Mercosur), the smarter (the organization)." Hamed said "the global trend is toward unification....all that Venezuela can offer as a state, as a government, as a country, will be welcome." When asked whether he would follow the anti-U.S. foreign policy of Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, Hamed commented: "If today we try to get closer to Bolivia, it

doesn't matter if the president is Morales or someone else. It's logical, as a neighbor. Ecuador and Venezuela are further away. If they adopt an attitude of international policy that may be useful for them, that may not always be beneficial for us. Our international policy will always look to benefit our country's interests."

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COMMENT  
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¶12. (S) Post is concerned that Hamed illegally assisted Lebanese foreign nationals, incidentally or otherwise, who could have ties to criminal organizations or Hizballah. Sensitive reporting also demonstrates that Hamed once harbored a fugitive from Paraguayan justice. Hamed is a polarizing figure, and it is unclear how he will approach U.S.-Paraguayan relations. In addition, Post considers him to be a poor candidate to support Lugo's anti-corruption agenda. Despite these concerns, Embassy will engage Hamed in coming weeks and attempt to work with him to further U.S. interests. END COMMENT.

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